

**“The Blessed Life: Part 2” | Luke 6:20-26
(The Sermon on the Plain)**

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(Discussion questions on page 7)**

There are things that are not evil, that can do much good, but are nevertheless dangerous. Electricity can power a city. But handle a livewire wrong and electricity can kill you. Fire can warm a home, or burn it down. Another example is Tobacco. Its leaves have been used for medicinal and recreational purposes for centuries. But these leaves contain the chemical nicotine, which is highly addictive, making Tobacco so dangerous that in 1965 the Senate Committee on Commerce mandated cigarette packages bear this statement: “Warning: Continual Cigarette Smoking May be Hazardous to Your Health.”

Electricity, fire, tobacco—none of these things are evil. They can all do good. But they are also dangerous.

According to Jesus, this is the case with money. Money—wealth, riches—as a means of holding value or acquiring things is not evil. With money you can feed your family or pay your mortgage or support a missionary. But Jesus is less concerned with money’s benefits than its pitfalls. He warns that riches can “choke” the word of God (Lk 8:14), that we “cannot serve God and money” (Lk 16:13), that “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God” (Lk 18:25).

Like the warning label on cigarettes, we might imagine Jesus placing a label on our money: “Warning, object may lead to spiritual sickness, spiritual blindness, the forsaking of God, and eternal death.”

Jesus raises the dangers of money and riches at the opening of the Sermon on the Plain, which we began studying last week. Recorded in Luke 6, in the Sermon on the Plain Jesus calls his people to be different—distinct from the ways and values of the world around them. Last week we saw that Jesus reverses the values of the world in his sermon. Those who are blessed are the “poor, hungry, sad, and persecuted” (6:20-23). This week, moving to vv. 24-26, we see this reversal continue. Only now Jesus takes what the world calls blessed—riches, satisfaction, laughter, popularity—and pronounces upon it woes:

But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you shall be hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep. Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets. (6:24-26).

“Woe,” sounds a note not just of judgement but misery. “How tragic are those whose lives consists solely of the pleasures of this life, who know nothing of the fellowship of God.”

Riches represent for Jesus a whole way of life, a heart orientation that is more selfward and worldward than Godward and heavenward. They speak to a life where money and possessions, because they provide security and opportunity, blind people to their need for God.

Who does Jesus have in mind with these woes? In the context of Luke 6, it is likely he has in mind the well off and powerful who are rejecting his teaching. With no middle class in the ancient world, there were far more people whose economic state made it easier for them to recognize that they needed God for help.

Who might Jesus have in mind today with these words? One commentator writes:

Imagine taking all the people who have ever lived and ranking them by wealth. If you are reading this in the West, it is very likely that you would be found in the top 1%. And therefore, we need to hear the challenge of Jesus' words if we are to enjoy his promise, for wealth is what keeps so many people from following Christ wholeheartedly, and therefore from knowing the blessing of joyful dependence on our King.¹

We who have access to education, medical care, clean water; who never want for food or shelter; whose closets are full of clothes and driveways of cars; we are, according to the standards of history and the world today, *rich*.

Our possessions and access to care and comforts lie to us—they tell us we are independent, self-sustaining, that we can purchase happiness and a good life if we just work hard enough and have enough. So, we need to hear Jesus' warnings as addressed to us, because money and riches are a real threat to our discipleship today.

To heed Jesus' warnings, we'll do two things: First, we'll consider **Four Dangers of Riches**. Then, we'll consider **the Cross and the Economy of Salvation**.

I. Dangers of Riches

1. Riches Blind

Jesus begins the warnings, But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation (6:24). He is drawing a distinction between the present life and the life to come, saying that those who live only for earthly riches, will only know earthly comforts. They will not be comforted in the life to come.

Money can do much for you in this present life. But money can do nothing for you in the next life. Trying to use your earthly money to buy heavenly comfort would be like trying to spend a peso in France—that currency just isn't accepted there.

¹ Allister Begg, *Christian Manifesto*, 22

But earthly wealth can bring much “consolation” (a term that means comfort) in this life, and as such, can blinds us to the reality of the life to come. We are so happy now we scarcely think of what will happen after we die. This is the warning Jesus lays out in the parable of the man who built bigger barns.

The land of a rich man produced plentifully, ¹⁷ and he thought to himself, ‘What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?’ ¹⁸ And he said, ‘I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. ¹⁹ And I will say to my soul, “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.”’ ²⁰ But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ (Lk 12:16-20).

It is as Paul says: “We brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world” (1 Tim 6:7).

Here is the first point: riches blind us by making us nearsighted. The more money we have, the more focused we become on this present life. It’s like the florescent lights of the city blinding us to the true light of the stars. And it is far easier for someone living in squalor to turn their mind toward the promises of heaven, then someone living in the lap of luxury. The poor have no problem crying out, “Come, Lord Jesus” (Rev 22:20). The rich, ensconced in their pleasures, are more likely to say, “Wait, Lord Jesus, I have too many fun things to do yet.”

2. Riches Dull

Second, Jesus turns to the appetite, the full belly: Woe to you who are full now, for you shall be hungry (6:25).

Earthly pleasures can spoil heavenly appetites. If someone is gorged on the natural joys of this life, they may find it impossible to seek after God for deeper refreshment. And this presents a twofold problem.

First, to desire created things more than the creator, turns into idolatry. Desiring something is an expression of loving and even worshiping it. But we are to love the Lord our God “with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our might” (Deut 6:4-5). The first of the ten commands forbids us from putting any earthly loves before the True God (Exod 20:3).

And second, earthly pleasures do not ultimately satisfy. As the preacher says in Ecclesiastes, “He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income” (Eccles 5:10).

Some may object in their hearts, and note that earthly pleasures do make people happy. This is true. God has designed us to enjoy his creation. But God has also “placed eternity in our hearts” (Eccles 3:11), and made us for himself, and we will neither be fully satisfied now or in eternity until we are satisfied in God.

We are made to enjoy the Giver, not just His gifts, as George Macdonald, the Scottish pastor and writer, puts it:

The heart of man cannot hoard. His brain or his hand may gather into its box and hoard, but the moment that thing has passed into the box, the heart has lost it and is hungry again. If a man would have, it is the Giver he must have.²

Christmas Morning: Humans preferring the gifts to the Giver might suggest an image from Christmas morning. Children are euphoric amid their new toys, scarcely aware of mom and dad sitting there watching them. And of course, mom and dad are delighted to see the children loving their new toys. But in the grand scheme of things, to suppose that these gifts could replace the Giver, the mom or dad, in terms of the child's true happiness, would be absurd.

The exchange of the giver for the gifts is at the root of sin. Paul explains in Romans 1 that human beings "exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator" (Romans 1:25), and this has led to all sorts of twistedness.

And is it not the case that in this life, those who really do accumulate the most—the richest and most famous—nevertheless end up having lives filled with sorrows?

Here is the second danger of riches—they trick us into thinking objects other than God can truly satisfy our hearts, and in the process makes us idolators.³

Third, riches can make the heart callous.

3. Riches Callous the Heart

Text: Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep (6:25).

Laughter as used here speaks to an attitude of boasting and arrogance. One commentator calls it "derisive laughter," suggesting condescending carelessness toward the misfortunes of others.⁴

Riches can impact how we see and experience the world around us. We tend to associate with people in our wealth demographic. The further you climb out of poverty, the less in touch you become with the poor.

Jesus' parable about the rich man and Lazarus is a sobering example. The rich man, clothed in purple and fine linen, feasts sumptuously and ignores the poor man Lazarus who is starving at his gate (Lk 16:19-21). The two die, with the rich man going to Hades and the poor man to heaven. From this new perspective, the rich man cries out for just a drop of water, but can find no relief:

² Citation comes from C. S. Lewis, *George Macdonald: An Anthology*.

³ In the Old Testament the Lord spoke of Israel, likening them to a flock of sheep: It was I who knew you in the wilderness, in the land of drought; ⁶ but when they had grazed, they became full, they were filled, and their heart was lifted up; therefore, they forgot me. (Hos 13:5-6).

⁴ Darrel Bock, *Luke*, 584.

“Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame” (16:24). How the tables have turned!

The Lord hates it when the blessings he gives us turn our eyes away from the needy, as he says of the wicked city of Sodom: “Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy” (Ezek. 16:49).

Apply: Can this happen to us? The more wealth we have, the busier life gets with fancy and fun things, and we scarcely notice the suffering around us. Perhaps the money-loving workaholic begins to neglect the family; the pastor hungry for a bigger church stops noticing the sick; the University making millions off college sports stops caring whether or not student-athletes are students.

Love of money seems to have an inverted relationship to love of neighbor.

Riches can blind the eyes, dull the appetite, and harden the heart. But, finally, they also can lead to compromising our Gospel.

4. Riches Lead to Compromise

Text: Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets. (6:26).

Money can buy you friends, position, prestige in the eyes of the world. But the opinions of your new and powerful friends can lead you to compromise your faith.

Jesus compares compromise with the false prophets, who told people what they wanted to hear instead of what they needed to hear. So too today, Paul says people will not “endure sound teaching but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions” (2 Tim 4:3). We compromise to be liked.

We need to hear this in Washington. Much success in places like this is built around who you know and what people think about you. Of course, we must be thoughtful and don’t need to share every detail of our faith in every working relationship we have. But there may come a time when a promotion, or a new job, will mean doing things in opposition to your walk with Christ. Times like these will mean hard decisions, and you will want a group of thoughtful Christians walking alongside you.

I have a friend who is very smart and very talented. Wherever he goes, doors of opportunity open up. At one point in life, he was beginning a PhD at one of the best universities in the world. His supervisor was a famous historian. My friend told me that in his first meeting with his supervisor, he made a point (these are his words) “to burn any bridges to earthly prestige that might tempt him to compromise his faith.” So he told the professor that he was basically a “serious Christian, and that he believed the Bible was true, every word of it, and would be praying for him every

day.” In a university setting like this, such talk would label him as a fundamentalist. But he didn’t want to resist that label down the road, so he took it on immediately.

Apply: to protect from compromising your faith, you might think about ways you can thoughtfully “out yourself” as a Christian at times. Perhaps on a first date, you just let your new friend now that you are a committed Christian, right out of the gate. Or you mention it in an interview. Or you talk about your friends from church when you’re at a work happy hour. These are ways you can protect yourself from later compromise.

Having noted these dangerous of riches, we turn to an antidote. How do we in the West, who are so rich by global standards, create a proper counter-balance to the malforming tendencies of our wealth and comfort? My answer: the cross. We need to set the cross before us and consider from its vantage point, not the economy of this world, but the economy of salvation.

II. The Cross and Economy of Salvation

I attended the Congressional Statue Dedication ceremony in honor of Billy Graham this week. It was held in Statuary Hall at the Capitol, where Graham’s statue will join other significant figures from this nation.

The room was filled with leaders, elected officials, and other dignitaries. Many were clearly Christians; some were not. I was struck by the juxtaposition of so much earthly power with this statute of a preacher, holding a Bible open in one hand and pointing to the open page with the other.

Some who spoke did all they could to make Graham’s message palatable to the masses—they never mentioned Jesus, and only spoke of Graham’s noble desire to have his crusades ethnically integrated (praise God for Billy’s passion for this!).

But when his son got up to speak, he cut through the fog of unclarity: “My father would have been a bit uncomfortable with all this,” Franklin Graham said (meaning, all this earthly hoopla). “My father had one message,” he went on, “Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners. And he never veered from that.”

The final speaker told us that Graham’s Bible was open to Galatians, with his finger frozen pointing to Galatian 6:14,

But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world (Gal 6:14).

There is only one way to be saved from the pitfalls to earthly riches, and that is to keep the Cross of Jesus Christ in front of your eyes at all times. And what do you see with the cross before you?

1. First, we see where true value lies in the economy of salvation. Jesus was the price of our salvation. All the money in the world could not ransom our life, could not pay for our sins. The Cross tells us that in the economy of salvation, our money is pathetic to God.

2. Second, we see that true love is costly. In our wealth, it can be easy to cut a check to help someone. But there is nothing easy about the cross. We need to practice a love that strains our muscles. How do we do that? Jesus will show us in the rest of the sermon. We must love our enemies, and forgive those who hurt us. And all the money in the world cannot buy that kind of love—it arises from a heart that has been touched by the Cross of Christ.

3. Third, when looking at the cross, we see that Jesus draws near to the lowly, and so must we. Jesus got dirty. He got beat up. Our lives may find us sealed off from the poor and miserable. Let us think of ways we can draw near to pain, suffering. Visits someone in the hospital; find a homeless shelter to volunteer at; plan a radically different family vacation to go to a poor part of the country or world to serve. We need to see and touch need, and recognize in that need a parable about our actual spiritual condition.

Close: I took a picture of the Billy Graham statue and have it on my phone. There are crowds all around him, flags raised, marble pillars, and statues of famous political and social leaders. But standing in their midst is this plain-dressed figure holding out a book—seemingly with nothing to offer the world except the foolishness of the cross. And I find myself wanting to write at the top of that picture, “blessed,” for it is a picture of true life, true eternal riches, upon the lips of one who was blessed not because of earthly possessions, but because of God.

Small Group Questions

1. Money can be an uncomfortable topic for us. Why do you think that is? Why do we get uncomfortable when Jesus brings it up, or when others bring it up? What might this say about our hearts?
2. The first three woes have to do with how money impacts our experience of life: “consolation [=comfort],” “satisfied,” “laughter.” What are some ways that we can find comfort, satisfaction and joy in God instead of our possessions and lifestyle?
3. The last woe has to do with how money impacts our relationships with others—it can bring us popularity. How do the opinions of others impact your faith? Does a desire to be liked ever keep you from faithfulness to Jesus? What are some challenges in your work life or social life or family life to faithfulness to Jesus?
4. What are some practical ways that comfortable Westerners can get more in touch with the poverty and brokenness of the world? How might this help our discipleship—our faithfulness to Jesus?